

Joint Statement Regarding the Re-Opening of Illinois Higher Education

As the unionized faculty and employees of Illinois institutions of Higher Education, and members of the communities they serve, we call on all higher education leadership to commit to remote teaching, learning, and working this fall, with few exceptions, for the health and safety of our students, colleagues, and communities.

The novel coronavirus and global pandemic have created hardships for students, faculty, and staff and continues to financially harm our institutions. Many of our university and college administrators are wringing their hands, creating elaborate plans to open campuses this fall; however, we know the safest option is to limit direct and sustained face-to-face contact. Further, faculty and employees alone should decide whether they are able to teach or work remotely without interference from the institution. As soon as institutions accept this reality, faculty and students can focus on preparing for a remote fall experience through meaningful remote class connections.

As we prepare, we must be pragmatic. We cannot control human error or poor decision-making. To bring large numbers of people from various locations into a single area increases risk, and hoping that no one will accidentally or imprudently expose others to serious illness is folly. We must stop pretending that it is possible to have education-as-usual without putting many in danger.

Additionally, plans that utilize hybrid teaching strategies prioritize presence over safety. While we have concerns about online learning, a well-designed remote course will be more welcoming, inclusive, challenging, and interactive for students than a “socially distanced” and masked lecture that puts all at risk of spreading Covid-19.

The only exceptions to this should be course content or skills that simply cannot be learned from a distance. If courses must run in person, they can only do so if all possible safety measures in place. Safety measures, based in science, must include testing, tracing, and containment. PPE must be provided following a clear and detailed risk assessment. Proper air filtration/ventilation and cleaning must be in place prior to the start of the course.

Faculty, staff, shared governance structures, labor, and other stakeholders must be involved in all decisions. Further, if any worker is let go because they cannot safely work at their campus, unemployment protections should be immediately offered including to all part-time and adjunct instructors.

Recognizing that these decisions have serious implications for our international students, we affirm the decision by the Trump administration to withdraw its discriminatory policy against our international students and allow them to continue working remotely toward their degrees. Colleges and universities should not be forced to risk the lives of students, employees, and communities simply to accommodate the President’s misguided policy.

Remote teaching and learning – at this time –will fully protect our students, employees, and the communities in which we live and work. It is the wisest course of action for the health of all.

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